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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 YAOUNDE 000769

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [CM](#) [ECON](#) [FR](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: CAMEROON'S COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP WITH FRANCE

REF: YAOUNDE 724

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

¶1. (C) Summary: Cameroon has a complex relationship with France. The two countries share historical, linguistic and cultural ties and many Cameroonian elites have studied and lived in France. Cameroon is France's largest recipient of foreign assistance and one of its biggest trading partners in sub-Saharan Africa, with French companies maintaining a strong presence in the Cameroonian economy. France also has robust military-to-military relations and people-to-people ties. The May visit to Yaounde of French Prime Minister Fillon and the July visit to France of Cameroonian President Paul Biya produced two new agreements and further cemented official relations. Biya used the July visit largely for a domestic political boost. The French are focused on encouraging stability both for regional security reasons and to benefit commercial interests. The French government is in a position to influence Biya's political calculations. If they chose to more actively encourage Biya on democracy and good governance, the French might be able to improve their image among average Cameroonians, many of whom are anti-French, and reinforce our interests here. End summary.

#### A Special History

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¶2. (U) After 35 years as a German colony, Cameroon emerged in the aftermath of World War I partitioned between France and Britain under 1919 League of Nations mandates. In 1961, independent French Cameroun joined with the southern third of the British colony (Southern Cameroons) to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon, with each region maintaining substantial autonomy until unification in 1972. As a result of this history, Cameroonians from the former British regions (Anglophones) do not have particular historical grievances against France. Their anti-French sentiments stem from frustration with France's more recent pursuit of its economic interests and its support for the Biya regime - frustrations shared by many Francophones, especially among the younger generation - as discussed below.

¶3. (U) In contrast to the Anglophones, the majority Francophones lived through French colonialism, which shaped their attitude toward France. According to noted Cameroonian historian Englebert Mveng, the French improved Cameroon's health, agriculture, and educational systems and economic infrastructure. Cameroonians were represented in the French National Assembly, fought with De Gaulle against the Vichy government, and entered the post-World War II period as a French "trusteeship" with a great deal of affection for France. The French in turn continued to invest in the country's infrastructure and built a number of industries

which still exist, such as the Brasseries de Cameroon (the national brewery) and ALUCAM (an aluminum company).

14. (U) The French period also left its scars. One Cameroonians scholar depicts the French mandate period as more "subtly pernicious" than the Germans, who were more overtly repressive. Many Cameroonians believe the French exploited Cameroon while doing little to develop it. The historian Mveng, while charitable toward the French period, acknowledges that labor unrest, political party activism and violence in the countryside made French rule increasingly untenable through the mid-1950s. The radical Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC) party led an armed struggle against French rule and was brutally repressed, including during a decade of post-independence confrontation in the 1960s. At independence, France determined who among its French-trained elites would take the reigns of power, marginalizing many of those who had fought in the independence struggle.

15. (U) This colonial history set the stage for close ties between France and Cameroon's ruling elites, most of whom are old enough to remember the pre-independence period. For many average Francophone Cameroonians, the French colonial experience left a cultural affinity but also significant resentment toward colonial exploitation. According to Cameroonian historian Daniel Abwa, the vast majority of Cameroonians supported the UPC in its struggle against the French and their hand-picked Cameroonian leaders. Abwa depicts French colonial rule as intolerant of dissent. He also notes that Cameroonians resent perceived French

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ingratitude for Cameroon's support during the Vichy period.

#### Economic Interests

16. (U) Modern attitudes toward France, especially among the younger generation, are perhaps shaped more by the strong French economic and commercial presence. Many Cameroonians strongly resent the French economic and commercial interests, which they perceive as propping up the Biya regime and spreading corruption in a web of shady deals.

17. (U) Cameroon is France's fifth largest commercial partner in sub-Saharan Africa. France is Cameroon's number one trading partner. French exports totaled about 575 million Euros (\$833 million) in 2008 (led by pharmaceuticals, cereals and auto parts), making up about 30% of total Cameroonian imports. Cameroonian exports to France totaled 370 million Euros (\$536 million, led by petroleum products, fruit, and aluminum).

18. (U) One French Embassy source estimated there are about 200 French companies and 160 subsidiaries in Cameroon. Many of the country's top companies are French or have French investment, including the Brasseries de Cameroon, Total oil (and by extension the National Oil Company SNH), Orange telecommunications, Cameroon Railways, Sodecoton (cotton producer), and Groupe PHP (banana and pineapple exporters). The French company Bolllore has investors in the Douala port, the railway and the forestry sector. The French-run Cementcom has a monopoly on cement production, keeping the supply low, prices artificially high, and dumping inferior grade cement into the market. French banks manage government salaries and the French Treasury holds about 65% of the deposits of the Bank of Central African States (BEAC), pegging the CFA Franc to the Euro. One of Biya's top economic advisors is a Frenchman who works in the Presidency.

19. (SBU) Many Cameroonians do not grasp the size of official French assistance. Cameroon is the largest French recipient of foreign assistance in Africa, although one local French official commented that this is "by accident, not

design." France's Debt Removal and Development Contract (C2D) program provides 537 million Euros (\$768 million) over five years, drawn from funds converted from HIPC debt relief, and focused on infrastructure, health, education, agriculture and the environment. One Cameroonian observer opined that French assistance has become more aggressively linked to commercial interests and to countering a perceived growing Chinese presence.

#### A Focus on Stability

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¶10. (C) Despite its deep economic/commercial relationship, French Charge d'Affaires Patrice Bonnal told Pol/Econ Chief that French interests in Cameroon "are not primarily economic." He emphasized that France is most concerned about political interests, which he defined as helping ensure stability. France he noted, maintains a low profile on sensitive domestic political issues, aligning with European Union positions, in keeping with a belief that domestic politics are largely an internal affair for the Cameroonians to sort out.

¶11. (C) France also has an active military relationship with Cameroon. In a recent visit to Cameroon, French Prime Minister Fillon signed a new defense agreement which he stated reflects a desire for greater "partnership," more transparency, and support for collective security arrangements. According to one Cameroonian scholar, this relationship used to focus on French military intervention options but has recently shifted to training and commercial sales. Post understands that the previous agreement also allowed France the option of intervening, at Cameroonian government request, to preserve internal security, a feature the French were eager to discard in the new agreement. While France has significant military sales and advisors in the Ministry of Defense and gendarmerie, it has not been very successful at translating this into a strong role in shaping Cameroon's security strategy or planning. Bonnal commented that France's military presence in Cameroon is less prominent than in Chad, Gabon or Cote d'Ivoire, where permanent or quasi-permanent (Chad) French military forces have been deployed. This, he thought, would help insulate France from

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public backlash should domestic politics deteriorate.

#### Recent Trips Reinforce Ties

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¶12. (U) When President Sarkozy's planned trip to Cameroon in April 2009 was canceled (reportedly because of scheduling problems), France took what Bonnal saw as the unusual step of sending Prime Minister Francois Fillon "as a gesture". The PM's May 20-22 trip produced two agreements. The first, on immigration, provided 12 million Euros (\$17 million) to Cameroon for development programs and opened 66 professional training programs for Cameroonians in France (there are reportedly 36,000 legal Cameroonians in France and about 5,000 French in Cameroon). In exchange, Cameroon promised to play an active role in checking the exodus of illegal migrants to France. The second agreement was on defense (although Bonnal declined to offer details.) Fillon also publicized a third agreement reached in a previous visit by French Minister of Cooperation Jean Nde infusing C2D assistance with new cash for the health sector.

¶13. (SBU) In his July 21-24 state visit to France, Biya engaged a number of French government, business and other contacts and met with President Nicholas Sarkozy. Bonnal said he had not gotten a detailed readout of the visit from Paris but noted that Sarkozy raised three specific issues: he urged Biya to do more to improve maritime security, he pressed for greater progress on good governance, and he encouraged Biya to play a more active Africa-wide leadership role, especially after the death of Gabonese President Omar

Bongo. According to the Cameroonian press, the French Foreign Ministry also noted that Sarkozy discussed the need for greater progress on democracy and human rights. Biya reportedly thanked France for its continued support.

¶14. (C) Both sides downplayed these recent visits. French Charge Bonnal dismissed Cameroonian press criticism that Sarkozy had not spent enough time with Biya or that Biya had not asked for more from France, stating that the French President spent a normal amount of time for a head of state meeting and that Biya does not normally go around "like a beggar." He did not believe the Fillon or Biya trips signaled any major departure in bilateral relations.

¶15. (C) In a recent meeting with Pol/Econ Chief, Sebastien Foumane, Secretary General at Cameroon's Ministry of External Relations, described Biya's trip to France as "routine." This visit, Biya's first official trip to France under the Sarkozy administration, had been planned for a long time and was "normal," given Cameroon's long history with France. He downplayed the defense and immigration agreements signed during Fillon's visit.

¶16. (C) Many Cameroonians saw Biya's trip as essentially political, for both parties. On his return from France, Biya's only comment to Bonnal at the airport was that no one had thrown tomatoes at him (anti-Biya protests in France were more low-key than some Cameroonians thought they would be). Biya used his recent trip to burnish his international image and gain domestic political points in the run-up to presidential elections in 2011. The GRC paid for large ads in a number of French newspapers during the visit. Biya reportedly paid for party supporters to go to France to show support, while he arranged for an unusually boisterous public welcome upon his return. According to some Cameroonian observers, Sarkozy and Fillon sought to use the visits to remind Biya of France's interests here, perhaps in response to U.S. and Chinese inroads.

Comment  
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¶17. (C) There is an underlying awkwardness in the France-Cameroon relationship. When asked about this relationship, many local French contacts are visibly uncomfortable. France is seen to have significant influence over the Biya regime; many Cameroonians believe the French forced out former President Ahidjo and threatened Biya when he was seen as too independent in the early 1980s. France is criticized for not using its influence to further democracy or improve economic management. The former French Ambassador to Cameroon conceded to us that France is increasingly unpopular here and we are often struck by the level of anti-French sentiment among many Cameroonian contacts. While this reflects in part the level of anti-Biya

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sentiment and in part business and historical resentment, it is also a reaction to the continued patronizing attitude of many French here. In an example, Bonnal vented to Pol/Econ Chief about the political "immaturity" of Cameroonians and portrayed Biya as playing the "typical role" of an African leader by not getting into the details of leadership or mingling with his people.

¶18. (C) Many Cameroonians contrast the French and U.S. bilateral relationships. We have fewer investors and less development assistance in Cameroon but we get more mileage than the French with our mil-mil engagement and Peace Corps activities. Cameroonians also seem to appreciate our willingness to speak out on democracy and governance issues. Many of our interlocutors are generally skeptical that France can change its neo-colonial ways. However, if the Sarkozy administration were able to reinforce our democracy and governance themes and distance itself to some degree from Biya, we could magnify our chances of influencing a peaceful,

democratic post-Biya transition. Such engagement could both improve the image of France on the Cameroonian streets and better serve both of our national interests in the long run. End comment.

¶19. (U) This message was cleared with Embassy Paris POL Section.  
GARVEY